

Winter

Issue 4

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PHOTOGRAPHY

Winter Birds

Randy C. Anderson

A journal of my experiences and travels



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The Red Shouldered Hawk.





An Eastern Bluebird enjoys the first sunshine after the Arctic front finally left the state.



Arctic Blast 2021

*Actual air temperatures
dipped below zero to an
astonishing -13, with
windchills at -29!*

By
Randy C. Anderson

We Oklahomans are used to weather extremes. Wild swings in weather are a common occurrence, especially in the transitional

months of spring and fall. Spring in Oklahoma generally starts to break in March and is fully underway by April. Tornado season also begins in March and settles down by June. Tornadoes have been reported in every month. Temperatures can plunge from a balmy 74 degrees to freezing in a matter of hours. I have lived in Oklahoma my entire life, and have experienced this type of severe arctic weather three times. None of the previous, storms equaled this storm in severity of temperatures, wind chills, and length of time for sub-freezing temperatures.

We feed and provide water and shelter for birds all year long. When the forecast came out about the approaching cold blast, we stocked up on seed, suet, and added covers for the feeders. We have a variety of feeders – a large flat feeder (covered), a smaller flat feeder, a two-tube wooden feeder (with roof), tube feeders, three suet feeders, a ground feeding area, and a heated birdbath. I have several strategically placed perches near the feeders where birds can perch before feeding. These perches are not there just for the birds. These are where I make



White-throated Sparrow



Dark-eyed Junco

my bird images. I call this my “bird studio”.

When the weather first turned and the first snowflakes fell our usual cadre of birds was present – Cardinals, Tufted Titmice, Red and White-breasted nuthatches, Downy woodpeckers, Red-bellied woodpeckers, Yellow-bellied sapsuckers, Juncos, Mockingbirds, Brown creepers, Blue Jays, House Finches, Goldfinches, Yellow-rumped warblers, Eastern Bluebirds, Pine Warbler (a single straggler), White-throated sparrows, Crows, Sharp-shinned hawks, and Red-shouldered hawks. We see these birds regularly, every year.

As the temperatures dropped below freezing, and stayed there, the number of birds, both in species and sheer numbers, exploded.

First to arrive in mass, were hundreds of Robins. They covered the ground, and they made a shambles of the feeders as they scrambled for food. Next, to arrive in large numbers were Rusty and Red-wing Blackbirds. The smaller birds were forced away by the much larger and much more numerous large birds. As the competition for food increased, the birds became more aggressive toward each other. There were squabbles at all the feeders with each species trying to force another away. After four days, it was a free-for-all. Since we are retired, the feeders never went empty. During the nine days of this storm, we were constantly replenishing the feeders. With all of the food we had laid in – we had to buy more! After all was said and done, we had put out a little over one hundred pounds of seeds, and seed mixtures. Three cases of Bluebird nuggets, and dozens of suet cakes totaled around twenty pounds. We found only two birds that succumbed to the cold – a



American Robins Came By The Hundreds



Male Downy Woodpecker

Robin and a Yellow-rumped warbler. Both appeared to have frozen.

Of course, all of the commotion at the feeders did not go unnoticed by the local raptors. The resident Sharp-shinned hawk hung around and we saw him make a few futile attempts to no avail. However, the Red-shouldered hawk was much more successful. We saw him catch four Robins, one of which I got on camera the day the sun finally came out. While the loss of a songbird saddened us, we know that the hawks have to eat too.

Amongst the vast number of visitors came a good-sized flock of Cedar Waxwings. They were able to take advantage of the water in the heated birdbath. However, the Robins

had stripped the neighbors' holly tree. We did observe a few of the waxwings eating the Bluebird nuggets (everything loves those nuggets) so they did not go hungry.

I shot over ten thousand images during those nine days. Of course, they were not all keepers, but I was very satisfied with the results of my efforts. Did I freeze to death taking all of these photos? No. Most of them were made inside, shooting through the very large windows we had installed for just this purpose.

Keeping the windows clean was impossible in the freezing temperatures, so I had to shoot with the lens hood touching the window. Shooting as close to ninety degrees to the subject with the lens very close eliminates reflections and dirt on the windows.

Fast shutter speeds are necessary, to get tack-sharp bird images. I was shooting at 1/2000 second, f 6., ISO auto (2500-6400) handheld. Using the tripod would not work because I could not have gotten the lens close enough to the window. The thick cloud base



Yellow-rumped Warbler

gave that wonderful overcast lighting with no harsh shadows, but it was dark. This pushed the ISO to 6400, which I use as my cap for auto ISO. My Nikon D500 handles noise pretty well, but using Topaz De Noise AI gets rid of noise incredibly well.

My lens of choice was the Sigma 150-600 mm Sport lens. Yes, it is heavy. No, I do not mind the weight. To me, heavier lenses are more stable to hold because of their weight (besides, my Nikon 600 f 4 is a lot heavier). When I first got the Sigma lens, I carried it around the house. I used it as a weight to build up my arms and hands. I practiced using it everyday. After a couple of weeks, it no longer felt heavy. It was comfortable in my hands and I could work the controls with muscle memory.

I tell my photography students to treat a camera for what it is – a tool. A camera is a tool. A lens is an extension of that tool. A master woodworker is a master of his tools and his craft. As a photographer, you must master your camera, lens, and the craft. It has been said that you could give a professional photographer any

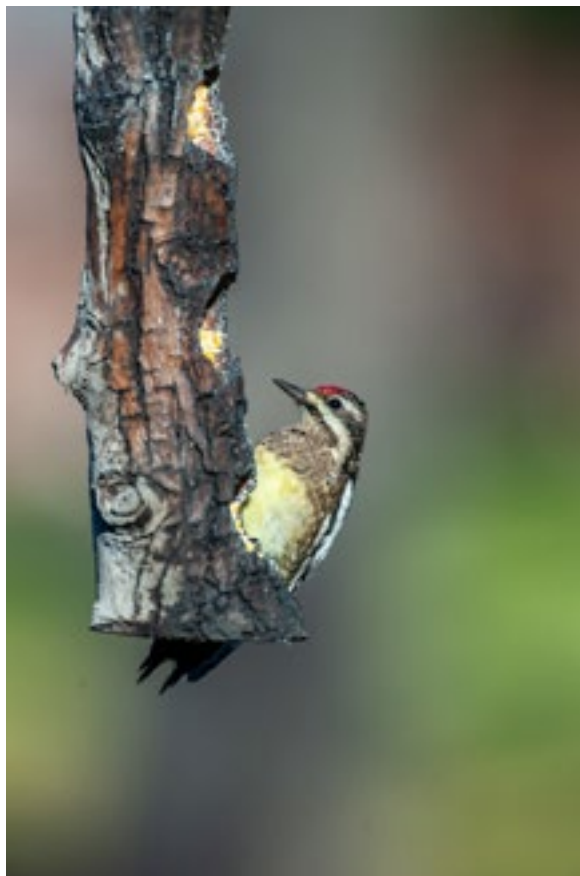


Brown Creeper

camera and the photographer could make great images with it. That is because he has mastered his craft.



Carolina Chickadee



Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

Death From Above...

I have always been fascinated with raptors. When I first started in wildlife photography my main subject of interest were the raptors. Not an easy subject to find, much less photograph. It was a humbling beginning. I teamed up with *Neil Garrison* and *Bob Clark*, photographing them as they banded many hawks and owls. Neil was then the director of *Martin Park Nature Center* in Oklahoma City (he had the permits). Bob was a herpetologist and nature conservator.

I learned a lot about the natural history of raptors from them as we made many forays out to band nestlings. We spent hours banding Red-tailed Hawks, Red-shouldered Hawks, Barn Owls, Great Horned Owls, Barred Owls, and even an albinistic Red-tail that I found when I was out scouting for nest sites. It was hard work but fun. The experience heightened my love for these magnificent birds.

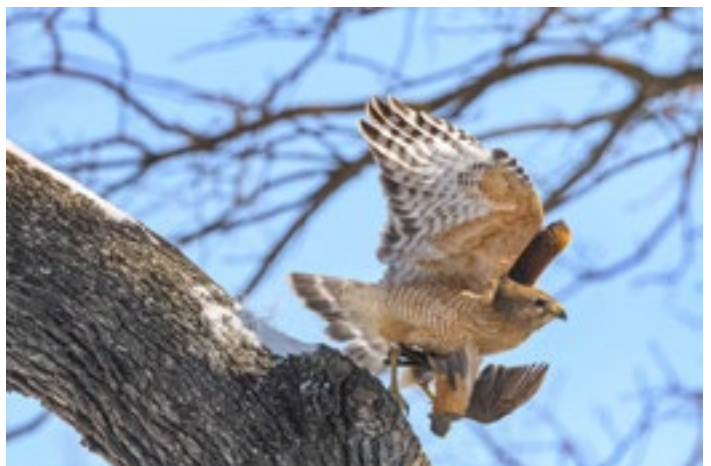


neighbors' dormer. He watched and patiently waited until the number of birds reached into the hundreds. Then he would launch himself into a dive and make his attack. He was 1 for 9 the day we kept track of him. And then the storm broke and the sun came out...

It appeared to us that many of the large flocks of birds had moved on, leaving a few dozen stragglers. I was focusing on a robin when out of the corner of my eye I saw him coming. I quickly dialed up the shutter speed and stopped the aperture down for a little more depth of field. Then I caught up to him as he switched direction... I caught him as he caught the robin.

So, as we sat by the window watching all of the birds gather at the feeders, we knew the inevitable would happen. As I said, we saw the Sharp-shinned hawk swoop down and try to snatch a bird without success (at least while we were watching). He was extremely fast and sneaky in his approach.

There was mass panic every time a hawk dove in – birds flew recklessly trying to avoid becoming a meal. The Red-shouldered hawk was another matter. He was very cunning, and persistent. He perched across the street high atop the



Shooting In Manual Mode

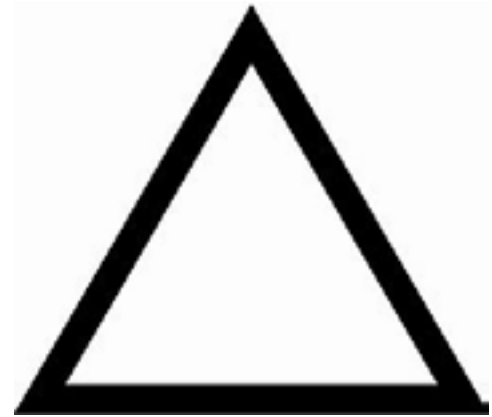
Yes, all of my students are taught to shoot in manual mode. In fact, they are only allowed to shoot in manual mode. The reason is simple: if they do not understand the exposure triangle and how to manipulate it, they will not know how to overcome any exposure challenges using shutter or aperture priority modes. Case in point, the students in my advanced class now *prefer* shooting in manual mode.

Let me say that I struggled with exposure back in the film days like most beginners did. I wasted money on film and processing, and I missed more opportunities than I captured. So I made myself learn to shoot in manual mode. It is easy with digital cameras, You have instant feedback. During the second semester of my beginning class the students have a three shot challenge — get a perfect exposure in three shots or less. All of them do it, most get it in two shots, and a few get it right on the first shot. If they can do it, so can you. Here is how it works:

The exposure triangle is made up of ISO, shutter speed, and aperture (*f* stop). They are treated equally when making an exposure - *unless* you want to freeze or blur action (shutter speed), you want a shallow or deep depth of field (aperture), or you want to keep noise to a minimum, or are working in dimly lit conditions (ISO). Then you make a conscious choice as to how your settings affect the final image. *You* make the choice, not the camera. Remember, the camera is programmed to automatically average everything in the frame to 18% gray.

For example: You are making a portrait outdoors and the background is very busy. You want a shallow depth of field to blur the background. So, you would set your camera to its widest aperture to accomplish this.

Shutter Speed



Aperture

ISO

The Math Of Exposure

Adjusting the exposure triangle using the math of exposure is easy – just multiply or divide settings by 2, depending on whether you want to increase or decrease exposure.

For example:

It is bright outside and you are in open shade. Here is where I would start (your best guess) ISO 100, *f*4.5, shutter 1/125 sec. Take a test shot and look at it. It is too bright, by about 2 stops (+2)

Here is the solution (there can be more than one correct answer)

ISO 100	No Change
<i>f</i> 4,5	No Change
Shutter Speed	1/500 sec (-2 stops)

You were +2 stops overexposed, and you reduced the exposure -2 stops. You should now be really close to a perfect exposure. You can fine tune your in-camera exposure using exposure compensation, or in post production.

PEARLS OF WISDOM?

Knowing how to stay warm, dry, and comfortable not only makes being outside more enjoyable, it could save your life!

There is nothing worse than feeling cold and miserable when you are outside trying to enjoy the great outdoors. That is especially true in wildlife and landscape photography. The most compelling images I have ever seen or taken myself have been in adverse weather conditions.

The number one rule when purchasing outdoor clothing is to *layer your clothing* properly. By layering your clothing you can easily remove clothing when you increase your exertion level and add layers back as you decrease your amount of exertion.

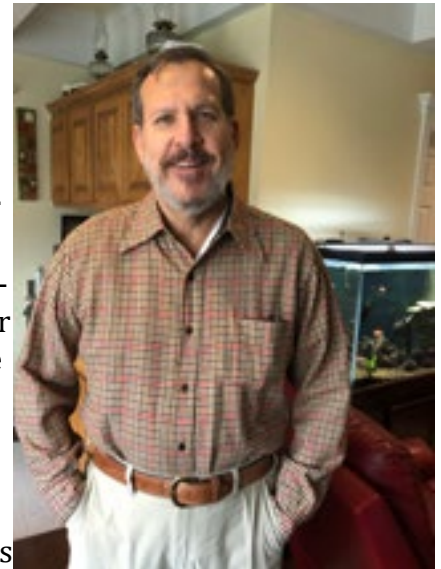
When you engage in strenuous activities, your body produces heat. Excess heat makes your body sweat to cool you off, sweat makes you and your clothes wet, and getting wet can lead to hypothermia much faster – and hypothermia can kill you. You *must* stay dry in the cold.

Layering 101

There are four basic layers you should use when layering for cold weather. If you are venturing into a totally new and harsh environment, talk to a professional outfitter or guide to get their input. Their knowledge and expertise can make your outdoor experience much more enjoyable. With all of that, here are the basic four layers.

1) BASE LAYER - Long Underwear

Your base layer should be close-fitting in order to wick body moisture away from your body to the mid-layer. Ideally, the base layer should be made of synthetics, wool, or blends of the two. Do Not Use Cotton. Once cotton gets wet it has no insulation value, takes a long time to dry out, and transfers hot and cold quickly. Cotton kills.



2) MID LAYER – Socks, Pants, Shirt

These mid-layer items should not be loose. Contact with the base layer is necessary to wick moisture and allow it to evaporate, and to keep cold air from circulating around your body.

3) INSULATING LAYER

Goose Down has been a favorite of outdoors-men for years - it is lightweight, and a very good insulator. It is still one of my favorites. BUT - It is expensive, and do not let it get wet.

Down loses all of its insulating capability when it gets wet, and it takes forever to dry. Consider synthetics such as Thinsulate® and others as an alternative.

4) WIND/ WATERPROOF SHELL

Eliminating the wind with a windproof shell can add 25 to 50 degrees of warmth. A waterproof barrier keeps everything underneath it dry. The two factors make an outer shell mandatory.

And finally, do not forget GOOD socks and sock liners, Synthetic liners that wick away moisture and wool socks are best. Keep extras in a pack.

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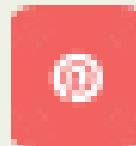
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Parting Shot

The Arctic Blast that slammed the Midwest in February put many birds at risk of freezing or starving. This Red-shouldered hawk hunted Robins.

